

African Americans in Honors Programs

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### Abstract

This qualitative study aims to explore the reasons why African American students have low involvement in the Western Kentucky University Honors College program and its' initiatives. Findings show that this low level of involvement is the consequence of a perceived lack of diversity within the Honors College, a lack of diversity in Honors College recruitment initiatives and materials, a feeling of not being accepted by their Caucasian peers, high levels of participation in and commitment to activities outside the Honors College community, and no minority community within the Honors College. Accordingly, African American Honors College students do not have high levels of identification with the WKU Honors College when compared to their Caucasian counterparts.

### African American Students in Honors Programs

Western Kentucky University is currently focusing on the retention of its students, which resonates in all aspects of the campus. One particular entity, the Western Kentucky University Honors College, is focusing on retaining a particular subset of individuals within its program, minority students. Historically, minority students have had low levels of involvement in Honors College curriculum and initiatives evidenced by a host of facts. What can be termed the two most renown student groups within the Honors College, the Honors Toppers and Honors Club Student Planning Board, boast of only one minority student out of the 39 member combined total for both groups. When assessing the class of 2016's profile sheet, numbers show that only 4% of students identify themselves as a racial minority (WKU honors college, 2012). None of the seven undergraduate student workers in the Honors College building represent a racial minority. At H4, the orientation for incoming Honors College students, all 32 camp counselors were Caucasian and only two of the 150 student attendees were minority students.

These facts demonstrate that there is low minority involvement in the Honors College that persists from their first year forward. The Admissions and External Relations Unit of the Honors College along with the Director of the Honors College have targeted the low involvement of minority students as an issue that needs to be immediately addressed.

Accordingly, this study aims to aid in the understanding of why minority students have such low levels of involvement. Of particular interest are African American students who represent the lowest number of incoming minority students. Literature concerning African Americans students in honors programs is lacking, however, this current study was able to utilize six main sources in the formulation of the hypothesis.

Astin (1999) proposed that students have a finite amount of resources to expend, and they will only expend those resources in places where they feel it to be beneficial to them. In a previous longitudinal study, Astin was able to find evidence supporting the claim that student involvement reduces drop-out rates (as cited in Astin, 1999). Furthermore, he found that there are specific benefits when considering students in honors programs (as cited in Astin, 1999). Utilizing the results of both longitudinal studies, Astin observed that students that were engaged in Honors programs were more likely to persist in college and would pursue graduate and professional degrees (as cited in Astin, 1999). A most interesting finding was that those students in honors programs felt very connected to the faculty but not to their peers. Therefore, students were expending their academic resources in honors programs, yet not social resources.

Jones & McEwen (2000) stated that identity development is largely shaped by how students expend their finite resources. The study yielded evidence that African American students involved in honors programs were more likely to identify with multiple identities that were largely influenced by the activities they were involved in. In this study, Jones & McEwen conducted an interview of ten women used to create a model of identity development. In the process of analyzing the data, Jones & McEwen identified key categories representing themes and constructs that are interrelated and when integrated define a core category. Examples of these categories were: identity dimensions in relation to difference; the importance of cultural identifications and cultural values; current experiences and situational factors; career decisions and future planning; and the search for identity. These categories depict an identity that is additionally based on heritage. This study highlights the dualistic nature of African-American students who participated in an honors college or honors program during their undergraduate collegiate studies; their identities are based on involvement and heritage.

Mayo, Murguria, and Padilla (as cited in Townsend, 2007) found that African American students are positively impacted by social integration and involvement. Burger and Milem (as cited in Townsend, 2007) found that African American students are more likely to stay in college if they feel that they are engaged in a supportive environment. In order for an African American student to feel integrated into an honors program the student must be afforded opportunities to grow and develop via academic and informal interactions with peers, staff, and faculty members. These interactions allow for the student to be able to address concerns about their experiences with their peers, address stereotypes about their race, or even lead to broad conversations in class that allow for a diverse perspective of academic interpretation. In the two studies the researchers found that when a student is placed in an environment where disagreement is encouraged among the peers more understanding about their personal or peer identities takes place. Therefore, curriculum and class discussions should aim to provide room for discussion and development to take place. This behavior of embracing differences to reach similarities should be modeled in the classroom and in informal conversations with their peers. These conversations allow students to become more comfortable addressing concerns with faculty, staff, and their peers. Also, students should be provided with proper training or workshop opportunities to educate them on sensitivity to others based on racial or cultural differences.

Fries-Britt & Griffin (2007) and Pittman (2001) agreed that Black students are less likely to be engaged in honors colleges than their Caucasian counterparts. Both studies detailed the experience that gifted and talented African American students have when attempting to successfully navigate their way through college. Particularly in the Fries-Britt & Griffin study (2007), the researchers asked the participants a series of questions in a semi-structured interview to identify their experiences in the honors program, which served as the model for the current

study. The researchers concluded four common themes of their interviews: feeling outnumbered in the classroom; proving their academic merit; having to disprove negative African-American stereotypes to their peers and professors; and having to prove their ethnicity to their own race. The findings of the focus group yielded support the fact that African American students are less likely to engage in honors programs due to the lack of support and would choose to become involved outside of their honors program.

#### *Ethical and Cultural Considerations*

Engaging in a study such as this requires sensitivity to ethical and cultural implications. Culturally, the researchers had to understand that different ethnic groups have different needs. In order to better facilitate the participation of this population, the approach was tailored to the minority group in question. The researchers aimed to accommodate all learning styles in the administration of the interview. The researchers realize that all questions had to be worded in language that allows for all educational backgrounds to understand the question being asked as well offer opportunities for the participants to seek clarification.

Ethically, the researchers remembered to not let their preconceived notions about what may happen influence the interview; regional and institutional differences could account for disparities of feedback provided in this study and other studies. The research team maintained objectivity throughout the interview to prevent any influence on the feedback of the participants. Finally, the research team realized the importance of maintaining participant confidentiality throughout the focus group interview and in the dissemination of information concerning this study.

Each of these ethical and cultural considerations and previous studies have been involved in the formulation of the current hypothesis, stating that African American students are less involved in the Honors College than their Caucasian counterparts because they feel low levels of

support. Involvement is defined as the potential for these students to partake in Honors College initiatives. Support is defined as the perception of there being students and faculty who physically resemble the participants concerning race and the ability of the Honors College community to meet their needs.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

These African American young adults of the Western Kentucky University Honors College (4 women, 1 man, Mage =19.6, age range: 18-21 years) were recruited in the residence hall of one of the researchers.

### *Materials*

Focus group interview questions 1-3 were obtained from a study aiming to explore the same topic as this study (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). Questions 4-13 were generated throughout the course of the interview. All questions focused on assessing the participants' level of satisfaction with WKU Honors College student body, faculty, staff, and initiatives.

### *Procedure*

Participant 1 met with all three of the researchers in McLean Hall study room. The participant was administered a short demographic survey including questions about age, gender identification, racial identification, and grade classification by hours. Subsequently, the researchers began a 5-item interview that lasted approximately four minutes. At the conclusion of the interview, the participant was debriefed.

Participants 2-5 congregated in the McLean study room with two of the researchers. The participants were administered a short demographic survey including questions about age, gender identification, racial identification, and grade classification by hours. Subsequently, the

researchers began a 13-item focus group interview that lasted approximately 55 minutes. At the conclusion of the interview, the participants were debriefed.

### **Results**

A short demographic questionnaire yielded information from the participants concerning: age, race identification, gender identification, and grade classification by credit hours. The mean age of participants was 19.6 with a range of 18 to 21. Each of the five participants self-identified as African American/Black. Four of five participants identified themselves as female and one participant identified himself as male. There were three sophomore year participants and two junior year participants. The demographic questionnaire was administered prior to the beginning of focus group semi-structured interview.

Post interview, the transcripts for both Participant 1 and the Participant 2-5 focus group were transcribed and data was manually coded. The researchers analyzed the transcripts from Participant 1 and the Participant 2-5 focus group in order to determine how prevalent the themes from the aforementioned literature were in their feedback. The researchers further analyzed the transcripts from both Participant 1 and the Participant 2-5 focus group for recurring themes among the feedback of the participants themselves; what topics the participants mentioned consistently in response to the interview. In order to maintain a high level of intercoder reliability, the researchers discussed their separate analyses of the transcripts and came to an agreement on what they felt to be the top themes that emerged as well as the instances in which the research literature was supported in the participants' feedback.

The literature proposed five different themes. Astin (1999) proposes that students have a finite amount of resources to expend, and that they will only expend those resources in places where they feel it to be beneficial to them. This theory was supported by five mentions in the



manuscript. Jones & McEwen (2000) state that identity development largely is shaped by how students expend their finite resources; African American students are less likely to identify themselves as being Honors College members compared to their Caucasian counterparts. The researchers feel that African American Honors College students are utilizing the technique of identifying with multiple aspects of their self in the segmented fashion; they keep their identities separate, largely depending on context. This concept was evidenced six times in the manuscripts. Mayo, Murguria, and Padilla (as cited in Townsend, 2007) found that African American students are positively impacted by social integration and involvement. Social integration and involvement were discussed 19 times. Burger and Milem (as cited in Townsend, 2007) found that African American students are more likely to stay in college if they feel that they are in a supportive environment. Accordingly supportive environments were discussed three times. Lastly, Fries-Britt & Griffin (2007) and Pittman (2001) agree that Black students are less involved in honors colleges than their White counterparts supported four times in the interviews.

There were five themes that emerged from the participants' feedback. The first theme was "the need for more diversity in the WKU Honors College student body, faculty, and staff", which was mentioned 15 times. "The need to feel more included by Caucasian honors students" was the second theme mentioned 15 times as well. The third theme was the need for "diversification of initiatives geared toward those outside the Honors College", which includes recruiting more minority students with current minorities and issuing more printed materials that depict minority students in the Honors College. This theme was mentioned six times. Participants mentioned a "need for a minority honors community" five times. Lastly, the theme of being involved outside the Honors College and wanting to be more involved in the Honors College was stated four times. Additionally, the word knowledge was mentioned 26 times

within the two interviews. The word knowledge was frequently used in the context of African American students wanting to know what the Honors College is, how to get involved, and what the benefits of being a member are.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to find out why African American students in the Honors College are less engaged than their Caucasian counterparts. The researchers hypothesized that this was due to a lack of support from within the Honors College; support meaning are their students and faculty who look like me and are my needs being met in this community. The results from the focus group conclude that the hypothesis was supported. After analyzing the statements from the focus group, five themes emerged that attribute to the lack of support that the African American students are receiving from the Honors College: the need for more diversity in the Western Kentucky University Honors College student body, faculty, and staff; the need to feel more accepted and included by the Caucasian honors students; the need for diversification of the initiatives geared toward those outside the Honors College; the need for a community for the minority honors students; and involvement in and outside the Honors College.

#### *Diversity in the Honors College*

Astin (1999) proposes that students have a finite amount of resources to expend, and that they will only expend those resources in places where they feel it to be beneficial to them. Jones & McEwen (2000) state that identity development largely is shaped by how students expend these finite resources. The participants in the study are involved in several organizations or groups on the college campus, but they are not involved in Honors College programs. Many of them expressed that they chose to be involved outside of the Honors College because the organizations were more diverse. One participant stated,

I have my academic life with those who don't look like me and don't reach out. I have to compensate for that socially. The minute I leave this class I go to social events or the university center with people who look like me.

Race can be a large part of a person's identity, so in order to not lose that part of themselves these participants chose to go outside of the Honors College to fulfill that need for that part of their identity. African American students have low levels of involvement in the Western Kentucky University Honors College because a student's time is a valuable, finite resource, so if they do not feel that the event is going to benefit them personally then they are more than likely not going to be involved with that event.

#### *Acceptance and Inclusion from Peers*

Mayo, Murguria, and Padilla (as cited in Townsend, 2007) found that African American students are positively impacted by social integration and involvement. It was assumed that the lack of support for the African American students in the Honors College would be from the faculty or staff. However, the participants actually reported the faculty and staff as being very supportive of them in the program. Instead, the lack of support was largely from the participant's Caucasian peers. Many of the participants mentioned instances in which Caucasian students were insensitive to their perspectives or questioning their place in the Honors College because of their race, which causes the African American students to constantly defend their right to be in the Honors program.

One participant stated, "They don't look at my ID when I walk into this building [Honors College residence hall] because they expect me to get checked in and now they realize that I live here." Another participant said, "It's cliquey and the interaction [between minorities and non-minorities] within the classroom is bare minimum unless we are talking about something in

reference to African Americans and the professor will ask me as the only Black person.” The words ‘acceptance’ or ‘welcomed’ were used frequently in the interview in reference to the Caucasian honors students making the African American students feel unaccepted or unwelcomed. One participant said,

I will say that after joining the HC [Honors College] the advisors are encouraging and helpful which I appreciated, but when it comes to the students I don’t feel accepted.

When I first moved in to the honors dorm I got a bunch of crazy looks for a long time, which was discouraging. They [other honors students] treated me as if I shouldn’t be in the Honors College so why would I stay.

If the African American students aren’t feeling accepted and welcomed by their peers, then why would they want to interact with them outside of the classroom? The lack of support from the Caucasian peers contributes heavily to the lack of involvement from the African American students in the Honors College.

#### *Diversification of Recruitment Initiatives*

All of the participants in the study mentioned the lack of diversity in the recruitment materials, such as brochures and pictures used in social media for the Honors College. During one part of the focus group a question was asked about the participant’s involvement in the Honors College retreat, H4, that the majority of Honors freshmen attend every year. One participant said, “

I heard about it [H4] from publications, but I didn’t know its purpose. When I saw previous pictures all I saw were Caucasian people and I have no issues interacting with those unlike myself, but it would be comforting to know other faces.

When asking the students at the end of the interview about what could the Honors College do to increase support from the African American or other minority students, many participants mentioned being more inclusive with print publications. One participant said, “Advertise for us more, nothing special but just show us that people of our ethnicity or race are accepted.” This lack of representation in print materials proved to be significant in the study because when assessing the materials most utilized by the Honors College Admissions Team, minorities are almost overrepresented compared to their existence within the Honors College. However, when looking through the Honors College blog photos of different events, most of them depict White students. Additionally, those students who utilize the Honors College Facebook and Twitter pages tend to be Caucasian. Since those are the media outlets that incoming and current students will most likely reference in determining what their experience will be like in the Honors College, it is not surprising that the participants would request more minority representation.

Another aspect of diversity with recruitment that was discussed involved recruiting other African American students by using current African American students to help. One participant pointed out that the administration from the Honors College had not made a push for more African Americans to be involved in the Honors College, so the participants then told stories that involved some of their African American friends that wanted to be part of the Honors College but they did not know how to join and did not feel welcomed to join the Honors College. Therefore, many of the participants discussed the importance of the current African American honors students being the ones to recruit to increase the number of African American and other minority students in the college. Since few African American students are involved with Honors College recruitment events, it is harder to recruit other African American students to join the program. The lack of diversity in recruitment initiatives for the college is another way that the

African American students are feeling unsupported by the Honors College. Diversifying the recruitment initiatives for the Honors College supports Mayo, Maguria, and Padilla (as cited in Townsend, 2007), Astin (1999), and Jones & McEwen's (2000) theories on involvement that have previously been mentioned. Recruiting more African American students for the Honors College might benefit the students by increasing the social integration for African American students and the support that the African American students currently feel from other peers.

*Need for Minority Honors Community*

Burger and Milem (as cited in Townsend, 2007) found that African American students are more likely to stay in college if they feel that they are in a supportive environment. During the focus group, a question was posed concerning the likelihood of the participants being involved in the Honors College. One of the participants said,

I would like to be more involved because if my opinion isn't heard, there is no minority opinion. I feel responsible; if I want other people of color then it has to start somewhere. I didn't know p4 and p2 were in the HC. I knew p5 was. As far as focus groups, I would definitely like to be involved in focus groups that are geared toward getting more minorities involved and to reach out.

None of the four participants in the focus group knew everyone in the group. Even though the African American population in the Honors College is small, the students are not knowledgeable about the other African American students in the program. A minority or African American honors student community or support system has not been established in the college, but according to the conversation, there is an obvious lack of support that African American students are experiencing by not interacting with other African American students in the college. All of

the participants said that they would like to have more focus groups for minorities in the college to discuss ways to improve the minority involvement in the Honors College.

A mentoring program was also proposed in the focus group to improve the lack of support that the African American students are facing in the Honors College and to increase the retention and recruitment for African American honors students. When asked, almost all of the participants showed an interest in creating a mentoring program. One participant was very interested in the idea and even offered ways to construct the program. This participant said,

I know a young Black student now who is thinking about not graduating [from the Honors College] because he doesn't feel supported. Two other African American females were in the HC [Honors College] and didn't feel supported and didn't graduate from the HC. If they had that connection with the HC and [knew] someone who looks [looked] like you [them] that would increase retention in African American [students].

From this experience, the participants thought it might be a good idea to create a mentoring program that pairs an upperclassmen African American honors student with a freshmen African American honors student. All of the students agreed that a mentoring program constructed in that fashion could help create a minority honors community for the Honors College and hopefully retain more African American students who are currently lacking support.

#### *Involvement in the Honors College*

Fries-Britt & Griffin (2007) and Pittman (2001) agree that Black students are less involved in honors colleges than their White counterparts. These studies are evidence that this trend of African American students being less involved in comparison to their Caucasian counterparts is not just happening in the Western Kentucky University Honors College. Involvement itself is not the problem for the participant's in the focus group. In fact, the

participants are highly involved across campus, holding positions in many different campus organizations, but the organizations are outside the Honors College. However, they all expressed having an interest at one time or another about wanting to be involved in the Honors College but did not know how to go about being involved in the Honors College.

One of the significant words that stood out in the study was ‘knowledge.’ The word knowledge manifested itself 26 times throughout the interview. This frequent occurrence of the word ‘knowledge’ infers that there is a significant lack of knowledge about how to get involved. It also suggests that the students are curious about being involved, but again might not know or are afraid to figure out how to get involved, possibly due to the lack of the support that the African American students seem to be experiencing within the Honors College.

One of the sophomore participants said that she would like to be involved, but in a way that would benefit her. This participant expressed the desire for the Honors College to sell itself better to her because she was never told how the college could really benefit her or the perks of being an honors student. Again, Astin’s (1999) work on involvement implies that a student’s resources, especially with time, are finite. Therefore, if the benefits of involvement with a certain group are lacking for the student, then they will not invest their time in that group. Not all of the participant’s shared the desire for benefits from the Honors College, so it might not be significant to every African American student, but it is important to note that this participant was the youngest participant, thus implying that the sell or the benefits of the Honors College involvement might be a more important factor for an incoming or freshmen honors student.

All five themes that were found through analyzing the focus groups contribute to the idea that African American students are less involved in the Honors College because they feel a lack of support from the Honors College, thus supporting the hypothesis.



*Implications*

The implications of this study on the experiences of African American students in the Honors College and in relation to the field of student affairs abound. Student Affairs professionals need to make sure that they are invested in personally advancing their knowledge and training when serving underrepresented populations. The training should be provided for all levels beginning with administration to student staff in their respective units. The participants reported having attended to various offices on campus and being questioned about their membership in the Honors College based on their Racial/Ethnic background. It is important that as professionals it becomes a priority to train student staff members that work in our respective units in the importance of making a student feel welcome even when they may not be a member of our unit. It is these interactions that can lead to a good or bad perception of diversity appreciation within our unit, ultimately affecting recruitment and retention rates of minority students.

It is highly recommended that all faculty and staff members are provided with comprehensive diversity training to ensure that they are able to create an environment that allows students to develop understanding of each other. A successfully diversified community will include formal conversations in the classroom and informal social events that aim to continually educate students on the perspectives of different races or ethnicities. The participants specifically mentioned focus groups as a way to identify possibilities for improvement in services minority students receive or as an outlet for minority student interaction.

Images of diverse students should be used in advertisements as many students shared that they look for peers that look like them before joining an organization. This need for those who look like them resonates with their thoughts on faculty and staff as well. All departments should

attempt to hire at least a staff member that is representative of the student population being served. This is recommended because students of minority background are more likely to share personal, academic, or career concerns with someone that looks like them due to a sense of sympathy created by the assumption of similar experiences in their educational career.

When considering the Honors College at WKU, the participants feel that this entity needs to increase their initiatives targeted towards the involvement of minority students in order to improve their position within the program. Encouraging more minority students to serve, as Honors Toppers would allow for minority students to gain transferrable skills, which can be used at a later time in their careers. Also, it would enable minority students outside the Honors College comfort in seeking to learn about the admission requirements of the Honors College, in becoming familiar with staff members, and in learning the benefits of membership.

Many of the participants expressed great interest in learning of the various initiatives that are currently in place for recruitment, retention, and development of minority students. The participants expressed interest in playing more of an active role in the development of the recruitment and programming materials to be used for future recruitment. It was also a general sentiment that a minority student association would be of great benefit as it would allow for the minority students to create an opportunity to program specifically around topics that affect their collegiate experience.

A suggestion was also made that upper-class students of minority backgrounds attend the Honors orientation program, H4, and facilitate diversity workshops regarding some of the differences the students may experience regarding communication, life styles, or even perspectives on social issues. These workshops would be intended to provide students of various backgrounds more comfort in having informal conversations with students that are of different

racial/ethnic backgrounds than theirs. This would begin the creation of a more inclusive and supportive community within the Honors College.

### *Limitations*

All of the limitations were possible threats to external validity. One reason was sampling: there was only one male that participated; therefore, the answers that were given could be biased based on gender perspective. The answers from the male that did participate were a little different from the rest of the female's answers, so adding more males in the group may or may not have changed the conversation in the focus group. In addition, participants were drawn from a convenience sample. The sample was limited to African American students who currently live or had lived in one of the Honors College residence halls; therefore, generalization of the results for other Honors College programs may be limited.

The second limitation was due to scheduling for the focus group. The focus group was scheduled right after Thanksgiving Break, so the students were very busy with tests and final projects. Some of the participants in the study are also involved with the Debate Team, which requires some traveling; therefore, scheduling a focus group with everyone proved to be an issue. If the focus group would have taken place earlier in the semester, there might have been more participants.

The third limitation is a result of the scheduling problem for the focus group members. Participant 1 was not able to meet at the same time as the rest of the group, but that participant was still given a semi-structured interview; however, Participant 1 only answered five of the same questions that the rest of the participants were given. Participants 2-5 had 13 questions to answer, which stemmed from the conversation that grew within the group. Questions 6-13 were either asked for clarification of the topics that arose in conversation between participants or

because some of the comments sparked other questions from the researchers. Therefore, Participant 1 was not able to contribute to those questions or that conversation since that participant was not interviewed with the rest of the group. If Participant 1 would have been in the focus group, instead of being interviewed alone, the conversation might have gone in a different direction or Participant 1's comments might have reiterated the themes that were already discovered through the analysis of the focus group conversation.

The fourth limitation was due to the participant's varying grade classifications and admittance times to the Honors College. While analyzing the conversation from the focus group, it seemed that each student had a different perspective of what the Honors College was like based on the number of years that they have been involved with the college and their experiences that have come with time in the program. In addition, not all of the participants entered the Honors College at the same time. Some of them came in as freshmen and others joined the second semester of their freshmen year. Depending on when and how they were recruited could skew the perspective of their experience in the college.

In addition to the limitations mentioned in this study, the researchers feel that future research should aim to include a larger number of students in the focus group. The researchers were able to obtain very valuable information from five participants, therefore, with more students rests the opportunity for a wider variety of feedback. Also, the researchers would have liked to include other racial minority groups in this study such as Asian Americans, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, and Hispanic Americans. It would be interesting to hear their various perceptions of the Honors College in comparison to their African American counterparts. Lastly, future focus groups on this topic should consider dividing the participants based on grade classification. The interviews evidenced different perspectives on the Honors College based on

the length of time that each student had been a member of the Honors College. There may be an observable consensus of what the Honors College experience is like that differs by grade classification.

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